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Christian Peace

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This sermon was prepared in outline years ago. It has been recast several times and preached in many places. God has been pleased to use it to comfort and strengthen His servants in such marked degree that the author now ventures to give it the more abiding ministry of the printed page.

CHRISTIAN PEACE

ACTS VI:15—"All that sat in the Council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel."

Luke gives us here a photograph of Stephen, the servant of the Christ. Experts might call this a "snap-shot," for it is taken not in repose, but in the full tide of heroic action. The face is caught, as it were, "on the wing" when unconscious of self and unawed by those about him, the man is absorbed in the great task of witnessing to his risen Lord and Redeemer. The photograph is, therefore, altogether true to life, and its features have so impressed themselves upon the mind and heart of many of God's tried and struggling servants that they have turned eagerly from their own days of toil to look upon this picture and grasp its great message of inspiration and of helpfulness.

If space permitted we should like to speak of the splendid devotion of Stephen, of the love that glowed in his heart, and of the zeal that marked his life. We should like to speak of the uplifting vision that was accorded him as he looked up through the rifted heavens "and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God." But we must resist the lure that lies "among these other pleasant fields of Holy Writ" and confine ourselves to a study of this portrait of a believer in the hour of his trial and adversity as an inspired hand has sketched it for us with a master's touch. "And all that sat in the Council looking steadfastly on Stephen saw his face as it had been the face of an angel."

Looking into that radiant face, we read the kindling story of peace—the peace of God that passeth all understanding—peace the world can neither give nor take away.

This, then, is our theme: The Peace of the Believer—Christian Peace.

Nowhere is this truth more strikingly illustrated than in the brief and fascinating story of the young man Stephen, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost." It is clearly revealed alike in the things that marked his life and in the circumstances that attended his death. He contended earnestly for the faith **once-for-all** delivered to the Saints. He crossed lances with the ablest leaders of Judaism, unawed and unafraid. Amid all the tumult and frenzy that surged about him in those final hours, he felt no tremor of fear, for he had within him "a peace above all earthly dignities, a still and quiet conscience."

Peace is one of the familiar words of the New Testament. It

is found eighty-three times from Matthew to Revelation. It does not describe something unusual, and extraordinary, and reserved only for the favored few. The rather does it picture to our hearts one of the normal fruits of the indwelling Spirit. It is something within the reach of all—something that may and ought to be possessed by all who would follow the footprints of the Prince of Peace. We catch an echo of it in the angels' song that broke the stillness of the everlasting hills and ushered in the world's first Christmas morning: "Peace on earth, good will to men." It breathes in the amazing promise spoken in the Upper Room on the night of his betrayal: "Peace I leave with you; my peace, I give unto you." The lofty message of the great Apostle to his comrades at Philippi throbs with the challenge: "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Thus more than four-score times does this word picture the joy that maketh not ashamed, and press upon us a blessed experience that every child of the King may have if he will but seek it along the paths that God has marked out.

What, then, is meant by Peace, and how is it to be obtained? Clearly, it is quite different from the common conceptions of men, and quite differently won, else it would not be true that so many of God's professed servants are "aliens and strangers" so far as this gracious experience is concerned.

Here is one who declares, and he is but the type of uncounted thousands: "If my life, and the circumstances that surround me from day to day, were like those of my neighbor here, or of my kinsman or acquaintance yonder, I might hope to have this peace. But, look," he adds, and at once you catch the querulous note of challenge in the voice, "look at the thronging cares that are my daily portion—the work and the worry; the duty and the difficulty; the toil, the trial, the temptation that crowd my path as the days rush by. Surely, under conditions like these, you do not mean that I could hope to win this wondrous peace." But just there you are making a mistake as vital as it is familiar. God does not hold you accountable for another's duties or difficulties. He makes you answerable for your own. Yet if the truth were known, that other person whose place you covet, whose circumstances you envy, would be just as ready to exchange with you as you are to change place with one of them. For the simple fact is you have no monopoly of trouble. Your neighbor has hers, your kinsman has his, your friends all have theirs. Each life, wherever lived, has its full share of duty and distraction and danger.

Moreover, the Savior's promise of peace was spoken in that Upper Room to a group of men who even then stood face to face with crushing sorrow. Their feet were touching the threshold of a life that was to be crowded full with suffering and danger. Had they been gifted with the Seer's vision, they would have seen along the path that stretched its weary length before them trial

and hardship, sorrow and peril manifold. They would have seen the headsman's axe uplifted, the gleaming sword of the executioner, prison doors swing open wide, and perhaps at the end of the path an uplifted cross, ghastly and terrible, waiting the coming of their feet. Yet to men situated thus, the Master said: "Peace, I leave with you; my peace, I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

It was to men and women at ancient Colosse who lived in the midst of a great pagan city, and who were pressed and oppressed by trials and perils and fretting cares, that the great Apostle wrote: "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called."

Thus the Scriptures bid us find and keep this peace not elsewhere but here; not at some other time, but now; not in some far-off dreamy Utopia that lies somewhere beyond the borderline of today—a Utopia of which men often speak and for which they deeply yearn, but which they never find on this side the grave. The rather are we challenged to have this peace, to hold it in our hearts, and to manifest it in our daily life, here and now, in the place and under the conditions in which an all-wise Providence has ordered our life.

For peace, be it remembered, consists not in the absence of disturbing conditions, but in your attitude of mind and heart toward those conditions. You may get it not by running away from duty or from difficulty, not by weakly yielding to fretting care, but by meeting and mastering these things in the name of God and by the grace which He stands ready to bestow with ungrudging hand upon all who humbly seek His help. For these things are everywhere. You can no more avoid them than you can escape the pressure of the atmosphere that fills the room in which you sit, and you must overcome them or you will be overcome by them. Yet, even in the thick of the struggle, with trials and perils pressing hard on every hand, "peace like a river" may and ought to attend your way.

Henry Drummond somewhere tells of two artists who undertook to place upon canvas their conception of peace and restfulness. The first artist painted a quiet lake lying deep within the lap of the mighty hills. The cliffs rose sheer and steep on every side. Jutting rock and beetling crag looked down upon it and were mirrored in its glassy surface. High above it the storms of summer and the fiercer tempests of winter swept past, while black cloud and the lightning's vivid flash were reflected in its crystal waters, yet the lake lay calm and unruffled within sight of the warring elements.

The second artist threw upon his canvas a thundering waterfall, leaping and roaring as it fell from its lofty ledge into the narrow gorge below, and then seething and foaming, the torrent pushed its way over and between the huge rocks that crowded the narrow channel and so passed outward to the great river that traversed the valley miles away. But close beside the channel,

and near to the tumbling waters, a birch tree stood reaching its slender branches far out over the surging waters. In a fork of its limbs a bird had builded its nest, and was sitting serene and untroubled within sound of the roaring waters and within touch of the flying spray.

Which artist had caught the true conception of that peace of which we are speaking? The first painting presents a negative situation. It very charmingly describes withdrawal from the forces that disturb—protection from the fierce strife of the elements that passed near and yet did not touch the crystal waters of the lake. The second canvas, however, places us at the very heart of movement and strife, and yet gives us a gracious picture of tranquility in the midst of turbulence, serenity amid distraction, trustfulness in the midst of striving and commotion.

This suggests an experience in my own life. Years ago I was crossing the north Pacific. Our good ship soon encountered heavy seas. Great waves pounded the vessel until she rolled, and plunged, and quivered from stem to stern. One morning as I passed along one of the passageways, moving cautiously lest some sudden lurch of the vessel should throw me heavily against the wall, I was amazed to hear far out on the high seas the voice of a singing bird rising clear and sweet above the noise of wind and wave. It was a canary bird, the captain's pet, carried with him on many a troubled voyage, and from its swinging cage far aloft on an angry sea, was giving out its full-throated notes of praise to the God who made it and was caring for it, even in the midst of conditions that brought fear to some, and discomfort to all, on board. It was God's sweet messenger sending out its cheery song of trustfulness and peace to all who with it sailed the mighty deep.

"For we know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
We only know we can not drift
Beyond His love and care."

All this is very beautifully illustrated in the case of Stephen. His soul was a very mirror of peace. Men hated and reviled him, yet he gave back no resentful word. They branded him as traitor, renegade, apostate—terms that with every noble soul cut to the very quick—yet he went quietly on with his work of witnessing to his divine Lord and Redeemer. They threatened him with death, yet amid all the angry clamor that swept about him, he alone was calm and unmoved. Of Stephen Tennyson wrote:

"He heeded not reviling tones,
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,
Though cursed and scorned and bruised with stones.
But looking upward, full of grace,
He prayed, and from a happy place
God's glory smote him on the face."

Yes, they even charged him with blasphemy, but God himself hurled back the charge upon the heads of his accusers by writing upon the face of Stephen the glory he had stamped upon the face of Moses in the Holy Mount, "and all that sat in the Council, looking steadfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." For neither bitter hostility, nor biting curse, nor brutal stone, nor bloody death, could shake the peace of a soul that is anchored securely upon the great God and Father of all.

But Stephen is not alone in the possession of this high grace. Those who constitute the noble army of martyrs have borne the same eloquent witness to the grace and power of God, and even at the blazing stake have sung the praises of the King until their tongues shrivelled in the flames. Further, a great company of His people, regardless of race, rank or condition, have faced without flinching pain of body and distress of mind. Leaning hard upon the Almighty arm, they have learned to suffer and be strong.

So may all who bear the King's name, with a faith that is clear and a purpose high, learn to walk the sun-lit trail or follow the path that leads deep within the shadows "as seeing Him who is invisible" and who will never forget and never forsake those who put their trust in Him. For Christian peace is simply the maintenance of a serene and tranquil spirit—unfevered, unfretted, unafraid—in the midst of adverse and trying conditions.

How then shall we get this peace? Three steps may be indicated.

(1) We get it as Stephen did, by a full and glad surrender of heart and life to Him whose we are and whom we have covenanted to serve. We can not withhold our loyalty and love, and expect to enjoy His blessing. We can not claim the rewards of discipleship, and repudiate its requirements. We can not profess to be a follower of the Christ, and still follow hard after the devices and desires of our own selfish and sinful hearts. Joy comes with full surrender. For "we are not our own, we are bought with a price." We belong to Him who has purchased us with His own heart's blood, and having given His life for us, He will not desert us in the hour of trial and of need. In the secret of His presence, peace and power abide, not as the result of stoical indifference to circumstance—the ancient Spartan and the more recent Red Man had that in marked degree—but true peace comes as the fruit of duty done and victory won in His name and by His abounding grace. "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty * * * He shall cover thee with His feathers, and under His wings shalt thou trust."

(2) The second step in the attainment of this peace is a clear recognition of **God's plan in your life.**

If your life is hid with Christ in God, you are not the victim of chance. You are not the mere hapless creature of luck. You are not bandied about like a shuttlecock by blind and unfeeling

fortune. God has a purpose in your life. As with some beautiful mosaic, He is working into that great and gracious plan the varied experiences of your daily life—its sunshine and shadow, its gain and loss, its joys and sorrows, all are being marvelously in-wrought into His wondrous purposes for you, and one day you will understand.

Years ago, there lived in the west a lawyer who in the practice of his chosen profession had won a good measure of fame and fortune for himself. In the troubled times resulting from the panic of '73, much of his property was swept away, and other trials followed in quick succession. Under the shock of all this his wife's health gave way. Kind friends suggested that a trip abroad would serve to restore her shattered nerves. The money was provided and in company with two of her daughters, she sailed for the old world. But on a black and stormy night in mid-Atlantic her ship collided with another, and in a brief time went down carrying with it a large portion of its passengers and crew. The mother was rescued. Her daughters were lost. When she reached the other side, the cable flashed this message to the startled husband: "Saved, but saved alone. What shall I do?" What did this stricken man do? Did he cry out against the goodness of God, as many have done under conditions far less severe? Did he say: "Surely God does not love me or care for my state, else he would not smite me so sharply?" Did he follow the shallow counsel of the wife of the fine old patriarch and "curse God and die?" Nay, verily. His heart was sore wounded, but his faith was unshaken, and sitting down beneath the shadow of his multiplied afflictions, he wrote out of a full heart the beautiful lines:

"When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

For me be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live
Though Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life,
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul."

His God is your God. The Christ who walked with him through the heavy shadows will go with you through all the broken way and "whisper His peace to your soul." And forget not this gracious fact—even "your disappointments are God's appointments," and that "if your face is turned steadfastly toward the Sun of Righteousness, all the shadows of life will fall behind you."

(3) Another step toward the attainment of this peace is that you shall **keep your ear open to the voice of God.**

He speaks to the listening heart through the pages of His blessed Book and in His daily providential care. He asks you to walk with Him in the way everlasting. He invites you to talk

with him even as a child talks in unquestioning love and confidence with an earthly father. He calls you close to His side that He may tell you of a love that passeth knowledge. He speaks with wistful tenderness of a watchman upon the hills of life who never slumbers or sleeps. Yet other voices there are, persistent and clamorous, that would fain drown the music of that Voice that speaks to the soul of love and life eternal. Beware of these, lest listening you lose that whose "price is above rubies."

Some while ago a story went the rounds of the religious press that will happily illustrate this point.

Two young Scandinavians, friends in the old country, came together to America. Here their paths soon parted, though their friendship knew no change. One was John Ericsson, the noted inventor; the other, Ole Bull, the world-famed violinist. After many years, Ole Bull came to New York and was thrilling the great metropolis with the splendor of his music. Meeting his friend, he invited him to be the guest of honor at these concerts. Ericsson thanked him warmly but did not go. Some days later they met again and the invitation was repeated. Ericsson thanked him as before, and then added: "I know you want me, and I deeply appreciate the fact, but I ought to say frankly that I can not come. I have neither time nor taste nor talent for these things. I am too busy." A few days later Ole Bull appeared at the office of his friend, bringing in his hand the violin that had held so many thousands spell-bound. He asked how some simple mechanical defect could be remedied. Here Ericsson was at home and the defect, if it existed, was quickly removed. Then taking up the violin, the musician drew the bow gently across the strings. The inventor for a moment showed surprise that quickly gave place to wondering delight, and when his friend paused, he cried "go on." Again and again the violin spoke at its master's touch, and the inventor begged him to continue. During a brief interval, Ericsson exclaimed: "Is it possible that I might have had this joy in heart and life through all these years, and yet blindly absorbed in my work, engrossed in material pursuits, I have stupidly shut these finer things out of my life? Play on, my friend, play on!"

Many there are who, like John Ericsson, have allowed the clanging voices of the day to drown the voice of Him who is the mighty master of all heavenly harmonies—the clamors of earth to silence the challenge of the skies. However crowded your days may be, however much you must keep your hand on the lever of the whirling machinery of life, ever keep your ear open to the voice of Him who calls across the ages: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me **and ye shall find rest unto your souls.**"

"Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed:
To do the will of Jesus—this is rest."